

Historically, the word “Gold Mountain” was used broadly by Chinese migrants to refer to western regions of North America. After gold was found in the Sierra Nevada in 1848, thousands of Chinese began to travel to the West in search of gold and riches...

The First Transcontinental Railroad, then called the "Overland Route" was built between 1863 and 1869. Central Pacific built eastward from Sacramento, California and Union Pacific built westward from Omaha, Nebraska, eventually meeting at Promontory Point, Utah in May of 1869. Central Pacific employed mostly Chinese workers, many of whom already in the United States because of the gold rush.

Between 1865 and 1868, the Chinese railroad workers employed by the Central Pacific built a track through the High Sierra as a part of the First Transcontinental. At Cape Horn, near modern day Colfax, California, the Chinese carved a track bed on a cliff 1400 feet above the American River. Trains frequently stopped at Cape Horn so the passengers could look out the window at the sublime landscape; the luscious, unending forest; the American River roaring in the canyon below.







Many Chinese were buried right along the railroad tracks. A Chinese worker recalled that two or three hundred Chinese workers were killed during tunneling and were buried in Caliente.

In November, 1879, more than thirty Chinese railroad workers died horribly in an explosion in the Santa Cruz Mountains, tunneling for a line that connected San Jose to Santa Cruz.

2700 feet into that same tunnel, another explosion killed twenty one Chinese, when twenty more workers rushed to help, a second explosion killed them too, blasting them out of the tunnel which acted like a canon bore. A third explosion occurred just minutes later, killing and injuring more. There were reports of the “stench of burning flesh” belching from the portal.

One of the workers, Ah Wo, was found an hour later, dead in his cabin with a scarf tied around his neck. Horrific wounds covered his body. His friends had strangled him to end his suffering.



Though never in numbers as significant as on the First Transcontinental, the Chinese had helped to build railroads in twenty eight states or territories. At one point around the turn of the 20th century, Chinese made up a third of the population in the Idaho territory, and around ten percent of the Montana territory's population was Chinese. Their wide-spread presence led to heightened racial tension, and in the late 19th century, racial violence towards the Chinese dramatically increased.



Pierce, Idaho from the Chinese Cemetery

In the summer of 1885, five Chinese men accused of a crime they did not commit were taken into the woods near Pierce, Idaho. A group of armed men hanged them between two black pine trees. A rock marks the spot.





Chinese graves, in the 19th and early 20th century, were temporary landings and not permanent resting places. The Chinese believed that if their remains were left overseas, their spirit would be imprisoned here too, wandering far from homeland, forever unable to return. Often, the Chinese who died in the United States were only temporarily buried and eventually returned to their home village. Their tombs are now cenotaphs, landmarks without a body, monuments for those buried elsewhere.

I'm telling ghost stories.

A story that has been passed from generation to generation tells of a Chinese miner who was jailed after he accidentally wounded a white miner in an altercation. Twenty white men stormed the jail and managed to slip a rope through the bars and around the prisoner. They pulled and pulled until the Chinese miner was cut in two and his head battered to a pulp. For years afterward, prisoners swore a Chinese ghost haunted the place, he became known as the Ghost of Hornitos.

I'm willing to tell it.

There's another old folk tale of railroad companies chaining hundreds of Chinese railroad workers together and drowning them in the bottom of Lake Tahoe after they built the railroad. The story is extremely unlikely to be true, but it is fiction that feels truer than truth. It lives on in the generations of people who are willing to tell it.

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was signed into law, restricting immigration on the basis of race and ethnicity as well as creating categories of “illegal aliens” for the first time in U.S. history.





Between 1910 and 1940, the vast majority of Chinese immigrants were processed and detained, some for years, at the Angel Island Immigration Station. Chinese detainees carved words of anguish on the barrack walls. Some detainees called it “Devil Island.”

Immigration Station on Angel Island

following
*First Chinese Baptist Church,
San Antonio, Texas*





After the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, the Chinese migrant laborers that were once concentrated almost entirely on the west coast suddenly saw labor opportunities across the country, and now, they have helped to build the railroad that can take them anywhere. A significant number of Chinese migrants became agricultural laborers in the American South.

During the Reconstruction, plantation owners who had benefited from the system of slavery turned towards the Chinese as a new source of cheap labor. The Chinese worked all along the Mississippi River in both Mississippi and Louisiana where sugarcane plantations were plentiful. Newspapers from the 1870s reported that hundreds of Chinese laborers were working on the Millaudon plantation in modern day Gretna and the Merrill plantation in modern day Marrero, both across the Mississippi River from New Orleans.



Marrero, Louisiana



Along River Road

I searched for traces of plantations along River Road on the western banks of the Mississippi River, but there were only oil refineries and chemical plants and industrial structures I couldn't recognize. Traces of the Chinese laborers that worked on the sugarcane plantations along the west banks had all but disappeared by the 1890s. Without family, community, permanent employment, capital, and exempt status, these seasonal agricultural workers were the most at risk with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. They may have been deported back to China, left Louisiana in search of other work, or passed away with no descendants to remember them or tell their stories.

Railroads were left behind as markers for that history of the Chinese building the First Transcontinental, but very little still exists today to remember the plantations and the sugarcane that once grew along the westbank, nothing that can point to what once was.

To tell the story of migrant laborers is often to tell the story of absence, of an amnesiac world, of disappearance, of a spectral, ghostly existence you know but cannot point to. What does sugarcane look like?





What does sugarcane look like?



